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New Offensive Weapons of U.S. and Soviet Imperil Treaty's Plan to Keep Space Free of War

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 25—Ten years after Sputnik, space is becoming an arena for warfare.

This is the interpretation being placed here on two recent Defense Department announcements—that the Soviet Union is developing a fractional orbital bombardment system (FOBS) and that the United States is developing a "space bus" that can drop off hydrogen bombs, city by city, over enemy territory.

Some officials are concerned that these announcements herald a potential escalation of strategic warfare. Others welcome what they consider a new candor in discussing an existing problem.

Much of the concern here developed from a speech by Dr. John S. Foster Jr., director of defense research and engineering, in Dallas on Dec. 13. It was then that he first applied the "space bus" nickname to the American weapon, which is a cluster of maneuverable missile warheads.

A Limiting Definition

Technically, neither development would be called a space weapon, under the narrow definition used for the last decade, because neither circles the earth even once.

Yet the Soviet warhead flies an orbital path for most of the circuit until a braking rocket suddenly brings it down. Therefore, it would be hairsplitting to deny that it was a space-borne weapon.
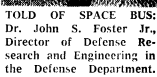
Furthermore, Dr. Foster has made the American vehicle a space weapon by definition.

It is the first time that the two major world powers have been reported to be working on offensive space weapons. Until now, at least as far as public appearances are concerned, space has been reserved either for peaceful exploration or for "defensive" military systems such as reconnaissance satellites, communications relays and devices that would warn of clandestine nuclear tests.

There is a double irony in the fact that the United States has become the first nation to declare, in effect, that space is developing the fractional orbital bombardment system.

Efforts Recalled

First, it is the United States that has made the greatest efforts, through legislation, treaties, public statements and actions, to prevent terrestrial belligerency from escalating into the space realm, these problems.

TOLD OF SPACE BUS: Dr. John S. Foster Jr., Director of Defense Research and Engineering in the Defense Department.

Second, it was the Soviet Union—not the United States—that took the first overt step toward preparing aggressive space weapons by developing the fractional orbital system, according to this view.

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara officially disclosed the Russian development last Nov. 3. Administration sources concede that he did so because it was already an open secret in Washington and much of the rest of the world. He chose to speak when he did, these sources say, to save the Administration the embarrassment of having Senator Henry M. Jackson, Washington Democrat, break the news for it a few days later at Congressional hearings.

Dr. Foster's announcement also was primarily a response to domestic political pressures, some Administration officials say — an answer to demands from Capitol Hill to know why the Defense Department seemed to have let the Russians get a jump in strategic weapons by developing the fractional orbital bombardment system.

These officials believe Mr. Foster was saying, in essence: "We, too, have some weapons capabilities in space. We have not been idle. We have such as Vietnam distract us from other national security problems."

What is so unusual about the "space bus" announcement is not only that it was made after 10 years of public statements deploring aggressive designs on space, but also that it appears to redefine ballistic missiles as space weapons, in this view.

Tacitly Excluded Before

Until now both the United States and Russia have tacitly excluded intermediate-range and intercontinental-range ballistic missiles from their consideration of "space weapons." Instead, ballistic weapons have been considered as very long-range artillery.

Even though these missiles climb higher into space than a partial orbit, such as the Russians' does, they do not have the speed or the flight attitude to establish long-time orbits; instead, they nip in and out of space quickly, as a trout leaps briefly into the air from the surface of a lake.

The "space bus," Dr. Foster referred to is simply a cluster of warheads, all launched by one ballistic missile on a ballistic trajectory, but free to alter their courses in time to spread over a number of targets.

By calling this multiple warhead technique a space weapon, Dr. Foster appears to have done two things that appreciably change the public thinking on space warfare, some observers here believe.

First, he has in effect included ballistic missiles in the category of offensive space weapons for the first time. Second, by admitting what weapon experts have known all along—that only political restraint has kept space from indeed being an arena of warfare—he may have clarified the public record and opened to wider public discussion the whole question of aggression in space.

Added to Category

Many observers feel that the issue has been clouded in the public mind since the first Sputnik was launched on Oct. 4, 1957, by a Soviet ballistic missile.

The treaty on outer space negotiated this year, principally by Russia and the United States, prohibits the use of space for aggressive purposes.

The treaty was signed at a time when the Administration already knew, but had not told the public, that Russia was testing the fractional orbital bombardment system. The lawyers who negotiated the treaty now argue that that system is not affected by it because the weapon does not go into orbit and is considered merely the development of a weapon rather than the stationing of a weapon in space.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk explained to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last March 7—six months after the Soviet test flights of the weapon began—that "it is generally accepted that anything that is in orbit is [in] outer space."

FOBS does not go into orbit (though the vehicle from which its warhead is launched does); therefore it is not in outer space and does not violate the treaty.

A natural follow-on to the system, technically speaking, is what military men call "MOBS" or multi-orbit bombardment system. Such a weapon would clearly violate the treaty, but Mr. McNamara did not deal extensively with that potential in discussing the fractional orbital system.

Multi-orbit weapons could circle only a few times before striking; be placed in space for only a few days in a situation such as the Cuban missile crisis, after which they would be brought back to earth by the launching nation; or be stationed in orbit for months or years.

Before the Foster speech, the same kind of disclaimer could have been made for the American weapon as for the Russian: ican weapon as for the Russian one—that it did not violate the treaty because it was not a space weapon.

Now, the Foster "space bus" nickname—applied to solve one set of political problems—seems to some observers to have posed a new set by further confusing the sophisticated arguments already surrounding the space treaty.